

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5792
SECDEF WASHDC
INFO USMISSION USNATO
USCINCEUR
USNMR SHAPE
USLO PEKING
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMCONSUL HONG KONG

C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 07010

E. O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: UK MPOL UR CH
SUBJECT: CDS SIR NEIL CAMERON'S REMARKS IN PEKING

1. WHILE LEFT-WING LABOR MPS CONTINUED TO GIVE FULL VENT TO THEIR CRITICISM OF REMARKS MADE BY CHIEF OF THE DEFENSE STAFF MARSHAL OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE SIR NEIL CAMERON THAT BRITAIN AND CHINA HAVE A COMMON "ENEMY AT THEIR DOOR, WHOSE CAPITAL IS MOSCOW," THE GOVERNMENT PLAYED DOWN THE EPISODE, STRESSING THAT SIR NEIL'S COMMENTS WERE IMPROMPTU REMARKS--AND AS SUCH OBVIOUSLY HAD NOT BEEN CLEARED IN ADVANCE WITH WHITEHALL. BOTH THE PRIME MINISTER AND DEFENSE SECRETARY MULLEY MADE CLEAR ON THE FLOOR OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS THAT NOTHING SIR NEIL SAID SHOULD BE REGARDED AS "ALTERING, EXTENDING, MODIFYING OR CHANGING" THE UK'S RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION OR PRC.

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2. LEFT-WING LABOR PARTY MP'S CALLED FOR SIR NEIL'S RESIGNATION, BUT THE GOVERNMENT CLAIMED THAT SIR NEIL CONTINUES TO HAVE ITS FULL CONFIDENCE. SENSING AN OPPORTUNITY TO EMBARRASS THE GOVERNMENT, CONSERVATIVE MP'S ON BOTH FRONT AND BACK BENCHES PRAISED SIR NEIL AND CALLED ON THE GOVERNMENT BOTH TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE ACCURACY OF HIS REMARKS AND TO SUPPORT THEIR THRUST.

WHILE BRINGING INTO QUESTION THE CONSTITUTIONAL PRINCIPLE THAT MILITARY OFFICERS ARE SERVANTS OF THE CROWN AND DO NOT MAKE PUBLIC POLITICAL PRONOUNCEMENTS, THE CONSERVATIVE GIBES SEEMED TO HAVE THE FURTHER AIM OF GOADING THE LEFT-WING OF THE LABOR BENCHES INTO ATTACKING SIR NEIL AND THEREBY DEFENDING, IMPLICITLY IF NOT EXPLICITLY, MOSCOW. (THE INCIDENT ALSO BROUGHT TO THE FORE THE CURIOUS AFFINITY OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY FOR THE PRC, TWO ENTITIES WHOSE IDEOLOGICAL BASES ARE HARDLY SIMILAR. THE TORIES SEE CHINA AS A POWER WHICH DOES NOT THREATEN BRITISH INTERESTS-- EXCEPT PERHAPS HONG KONG IN THE DISTANT FUTURE--BUT RATHER SERVES AS A COUNTERBALANCE TO THE MIGHT OF THE USSR. IN ADDITION TO THIS SHARED ANTIPATHY TOWARD MOSCOW AND FEAR OF SOVIET MILITARY POWER, THE CONSERVATIVES ALSO RECOGNIZE THAT CHINA IS A POTENTIALLY MAJOR CUSTOMER FOR BRITISH EXPORTS OF ALL TYPES.)

3. SENIOR MOD OFFICIALS HAVE EXPRESSED SURPRISE AND ASTONISHMENT THAT SIR NEIL SPOKE SO FRANKLY AND UNGUARDEDLY, BUT THEY EXPRESSED ALSO CONSIDERABLE SURPRISE THAT THE REMARKS SHOULD HAVE TRIGGERED THE INTENSITY OF FUSS MADE BY LEFT-WINGERS IN COMMONS. MULLEY'S OFFICE (THROUGH FACER) SAID THAT MULLEY'S CONFIDENCE IN SIR NEIL HAD "IN NO WAY BEEN IMPAIRED" AND THAT WHILE HE IS IRRITATED BY THE GAFFE, HE IS CONFIDENTIAL

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EVEN MORE IRRITATED BY THE TEMPEST IN A TEACUP PROVOKED BY HIS LEFT-WING BACKBENCHERS. IN REPLY TO A PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION, MULLEY REAFFIRMED CATEGORICALLY THAT NOTHING IN SIR NEIL'S REMARKS DIMINISHED HIS CONFIDENCE IN SIR NEIL AS "MY CHIEF MILITARY ADVISER." HOWEVER, BOTH THE PRIME MINISTER AND MULLEY LEFT THE HOUSE IN NO DOUBT THAT THEY CONSIDERED SIR NEIL'S REMARKS CLEARLY EMBARRASSING TO HMG, AND THE PRIME MINISTER ADMINISTERED A MILD REBUKE WHEN HE TOLD THE HOUSE "IN SO FAR AS SIR NEIL WAS SPEAKING ON MILITARY MATTERS, HE WOULD HAVE THE SUPPORT OF THE GOVERNMENT. IN SO FAR AS HE WAS SPEAKING OF POLITICAL MATTERS, IT IS FOR HIM TO SUPPORT THE POLICY OF THE GOVERNMENT." SPEAKING PRIVATELY TO AN EMBOFF, ENVIRONMENT SECRETARY PETER SHORE CONFIRMED THAT CALLAGHAN HAD BEEN IRRITATED BY SIR NEIL'S OUTSPOKEN COMMENTS TO HIS CHINESE BROTHERS IN ARMS AND WAS PLANNING TO "BREATHE IN SIR NEIL'S EAR" WHEN THE LATTER RETURNED TO LONDON.

BREWSTER

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